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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MUSCAT 000992

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TAGS: [PINR](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KMPI](#) [KPAO](#) [KWMN](#) [MU](#)
SUBJECT: FEW SURPRISES IN OMAN'S NATIONAL ELECTIONS

REF: A. MUSCAT 979
[B. MUSCAT 931](#)
[C. MUSCAT 742](#)
[D. MUSCAT 181](#)
[E. 06 MUSCAT 1468](#)

Classified By: Ambassador Gary A. Grappo for Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Thanks in part to a relentless government effort to get out the vote, a larger than expected 62.7% of registered Omani voters reportedly cast ballots in the October 27 Majlis al-Shura elections. According to the results of a speedy electronic vote count, newcomers won 46 of the 84 seats in the Majlis; 38 members of the outgoing Majlis retained their positions. None of the 20 female candidates (including one women running for re-election) was elected. By all accounts, voting went smoothly at the Sultanate's 102 polling places. Large crowds were present at a few locations depending on the time of day. The level of women's participation varied according to location; emboffs observed several private mini-buses (presumably arranged by candidates) ferrying women voters to the polls. The local press predictably painted a very sunny picture of the election process. The Ministry of Information provided a filing center with government computers for foreign journalists (but with no hookups for laptops); however, most major international media outlets appear to have relied on stringers and local coverage for their limited reporting. End Summary.

THE RESULTS ARE IN

[1](#)2. (U) Voting at 102 centers (mostly schools) across the country for members of Oman's Majlis al-Shura -- the directly elected lower house of the country's bicameral advisory body -- began at 7:00 am local time on October 27 and concluded 12 hours later. Immediately after the polls closed, ballot boxes were sealed and transferred to the office of each district's "wali" (appointed head of the local government) for an electronic vote count. Election results in some small districts were available a few hours after voting ended. Sayyid Mohammed bin Sultan al-Busaidi, Interior Ministry Under Secretary and Chairman of the Central Elections Committee, announced the names of the 84 winning candidates from all 61 districts to local media the morning of October [1](#)28.

[1](#)3. (SBU) According to the official election results, 46 of the members of the new Majlis al-Shura are new, while 38 were re-elected. None of the 20 female candidates prevailed in their electoral bids, although several had respectable showings. One of the two women in the outgoing Majlis

al-Shura ran for re-election, but she fell shy of retaining her seat by a few hundred votes. Winning candidates in most regions of the country were more or less split between new and veteran Majlis members. In the al-Dhahira region, however, all four of the current Majlis al-Shura representatives were re-elected, while all but one of Dhofar's 10 representatives -- and three out of four of Musandam's contingent in the Majlis -- were newly elected. Some of the 632 candidates received as few as five votes. (Note: Vote counts for each candidate are publicly available. All losing candidates have the right to submit an appeal petition to the government outlining the reason(s) that the results of the vote count in their district should be declared invalid. End Note.)

A STRONGER THAN EXPECTED TURN OUT

¶4. (SBU) According to the Interior Ministry, 62.7% of the 388,683 registered voters showed up at the polls - a considerably higher percentage than many observers had expected. (Note: Less than 40% of registered voters cast ballots in the 2003 national elections. While there is no official figure for the number of Omanis currently eligible to register to vote, some estimate the number to be around 900,000. End Note.) In addition to sponsoring a pervasive final media campaign designed to get out the vote (ref A), the government announced a paid leave of absence from work for all registered voters participating in the elections and directed voting centers to issue a certificate to be presented to employers as proof of voting. To further galvanize voters, the Grand Mufti of Oman earlier released a statement urging Omanis to participate "in the Shura

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process," while the suggested sermon issued by the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs -- and used by most mosque imams -- for the day (Friday) preceding the elections stressed the concept of the "shura" (consultation) in Islam and its role in Oman.

A SMOOTHLY ORCHESTRATED VOTE

¶5. (C) By all reports, the government's well-organized preparations for the elections resulted in smooth voting across Oman without any noteworthy irregularities. While the government declined to allow international organizations or other groups to monitor the elections (ref B), emboffs informally visited several polling places at different times of the day to observe the voting process. Morning appeared to be the busiest time at the polls, with a small surge occurring between 14:00 and 16:00 local time. Voting in the early evening prior to the close of the centers was generally light. At one voting center, a school in Muscat, emboff witnessed a morning crowd of approximately 150 people standing in the shade apparently waiting to vote. Traffic near some centers was very congested at times, with vehicles parked everywhere.

¶6. (C) With one exception, every voting center visited had at least two Royal Oman Police (ROP) officers to guard entrances and exits, with additional police to guide traffic at some locations. The atmosphere at the polls visited by emboffs was orderly and business like. Most polling places contained big display boards carrying the photos and names of the candidates. At several locations, groups of voters -- some entirely female -- arrived in private mini-buses (presumably arranged by candidates) to cast their ballots.

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

¶7. (C) Women were visibly present during voting, although their participation varied from place to place and also depended on the time of day. Emboff observed almost no women at one polling place in the early morning, while the crowd of apparent voters at another voting center was about 40% women.

A few centers in more populated districts were designated exclusively for female voters. One candidate in the north of Oman, near the city of Sohar, assembled a "ladies' tent" where female voters were given lunch (and reportedly a "gift") and then ferried to the local polling location. During a press conference the day after the elections, Interior Minister Sayyid Saud bin Ibrahim al-Busaidi expressed satisfaction with the participation of women in the elections and noted the strong showing of female candidates in some districts. He stated that he hoped women would win seats in future elections and added that "the quota system (for women) used by other countries could be studied."

ROLE OF THE WRITTEN PRESS

¶8. (SBU) In the days leading up to October's 27 voting, all papers carried substantial material exhorting registered voters to turn out and providing details on the organization and mechanics of the elections. On voting day, newspaper coverage focused almost exclusively on getting out the vote. There was no public discussion by the candidates or the media, however, about the issues. Reporting on the morning after was factual and predictably positive, again devoid of issues content. The official English daily "Oman Observer" held the presses until early morning in order to carry a full page showing all 84 winning candidates, while the private English daily "Oman Tribune" broke ranks very slightly from the generally sunny tone by headlining "New Majlis without a woman" (before returning to form with subheads "Voter turnout surpasses expectations" and "Motivated electorate reinforces His Majesty's faith.")

BROADCAST MEDIA: "SHURA, SHURA"

¶9. (SBU) Election-day listening to state Arabic and English radio was revealing. Both relied on an identical format, alternating between in-studio reporting made up mostly of dry "profiles" of each voting region and remote reporting from polling stations that gave, for each, virtually identical commentary (e.g. "male and female citizens are turning out in their numbers, praising the efficiency and transparency of

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the voting process, as well as the wisdom of His Majesty ..."). Interviews with voters, if not actually scripted, were highly rehearsed.

¶10. (SBU) Bridging each broadcast segment was an Arabic song -- "Shura, Shura," -- acclaiming the Sultan's forethought in creating the Majlis to help him in decision-making. English radio also broadcast this song repeatedly, a rare exception to the usual total segregation of languages. By early evening, English radio had returned to its usual pop offerings, while its Arabic counterpart lauded the success of the polling, with a special emphasis on the participation of women. Throughout the day, television relied on similar commentary over footage of orderly crowds and of prominent persons voting. The elections were the third story on television and radio evening news (after the day's royal correspondence and the visit of a delegation from India). As with all local newspapers, there was no discussion of individual candidates or their policies, or even specific issues that might affect voting in a given district.

INTERNATIONAL REPORTING

¶11. (SBU) The Ministry of Information sponsored a (fully funded) visit to Oman by approximately 90 regional and international journalists with participation, sources say, from as far afield as Denmark and Malaysia. However, election coverage is only one facet of a more general agenda for the trip, and most participants are feature or travel writers, not political correspondents. On October 26, Al Jazeera carried a 45-minute panel discussion on the election during which Omani university students questioned election officials and an academic, focusing on the lack of popular interest in the Majlis al-Shura. On election day, Jazeera's coverage relied on local reporters. Al Hurra had a crew in Oman for the elections, but other major outlets (BBC, CNN, AP, AFP, etc.) appear to have relied on stringers and local coverage. As of one day after the elections, international coverage has been muted.

¶12. (C) As reported ref A, the Ministry of Information set up a filing center at Muscat's Grand Hyatt hotel (a first for Oman), which proved something of a hit with local reporters, as well as visitors. One person in the center in the evening said that he had been there all day -- "it's cool, I can surf, and there's coffee!" As the polls closed and the results starting coming in, however, few others were there to witness the news. Symbolic of the Ministry's tight control of journalists was the filing center's equipment: it featured plenty of computers, but no wireless capability or laptop hookups, ensuring the ability to track every word written.
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